

RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH (VA)
28 March 1985

Flying Falashas Home

The institutions of the United States government may seem often to work at odds, which under our system of checks and balances isn't always a bad thing. But pulling together, they can be a formidable combination, and that is exactly what the administration, the CIA and the Senate were in the "quick and quiet" airlift last week of the Ethiopian Jews remaining in the Sudan.

During November, December and January, 8,000 of an estimated 9,000 Ethiopian Jews had been airlifted to Israel, via Europe, from the Sudan. In the Sudanese refugee camps, they had been no more welcome nor their futures any more assured than in drought-ridden, Marxist Ethiopia, where they had lived for centuries as "Falashas," or "strangers." But "Operation Moses," as that rescue operation by Israel was called, came to an abrupt halt when (a) some Israelis decided that public appeals and praise would help their cause and Israel's standing, and (b) Jafaar Nimeiry, Moslem president of mostly Moslem Sudan, decided publicity about even roundabout cooperation with Israel would harm his standing in the Arab League.

After that sad demonstration that (a) pride often goeth before a fall and (b) power too often cometh before humanitarianism, it was essen-

tial that any American follow-up airlift be done silently and swiftly. The Reagan administration, already checking out the possibilities, was spurred further by a letter signed by all members of the Senate urging U.S. resumption of the airlift. Vice President Bush, during his travels earlier this month in Africa, negotiated an agreement with the Sudan. Mr. Nimeiry values American aid, which his domestic policies had already jeopardized, as well as Arab opinion. He reiterated that he had no objections to a Falasha exodus — so long as it was kept quiet and ended anywhere except Israel.

Last week, in an operation planned and conducted by the CIA, the hundreds of stranded Falashas were painstakingly searched out in Sudanese refugee camps and trucked to an airstrip. Within three hours on Friday morning, and presumably after some maddening but pragmatic deception for a nervous Nimeiry's benefit, they were flown to Israel.

"The astounding story," said Sen. Alan Cranston, a Democrat who spearheaded the senators' letter, "is that the Senate can keep a secret." Equally astounding, considering the criticism, abuse and derision lately directed at the CIA, is the fact that it can do not only good work but good works.